



**East Greenwich Pediatrics**  
**Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine**  
**1377 South County Trail • Suite2B**  
**East Greenwich, Rhode Island 02818**  
**phone (401) 884-8900 fax (401) 884-9199**

July 12, 2020

To the House Finance Committee:

We, the pediatricians at East Greenwich Pediatrics, are writing to support and comment on the policies put forth in the New Article for the FY20201 Appropriations Act (20-H-7171). Our practice cares for about 7,500 children in the community. Telemedicine has been an invaluable tool for us to deliver effective, safe, and accessible care within the medical home while maximizing social distancing, conserving PPE, and triaging patient care during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Recognizing these benefits, many states have already adopted true payment parity laws for telemedicine. We urge Rhode Island to do the same. Telemedicine payment parity, not limiting payment by location, coverage for audio-only and audio-visual methods of communication, and waiving of cost shares are essential reasons behind the dramatic adoption of telemedicine since mid-March when social distancing and stay-at-home orders came in to effect. Below, we elaborate on the impact of each of these policies on our patients and practice.

**Telemedicine payment parity.** At the beginning of March, we did not offer telemedicine as a service, although we were actively researching platforms given the increased demand among our patients for the convenience of telehealth within their medical home. By mid-March, Governor Raimondo had declared a state of emergency and we transformed our practice to maximize social distancing. At that time, 70% of our visits with a provider were via audio-only and audio-visual platforms. Currently, with Rhode Island being in Phase 3, about 40% of our visits with a provider are via telehealth. Certainly, there are instances in which a virtual visit is not sufficient or appropriate, and we schedule our patients for an in-office appointment. However, telehealth has been a great asset for managing behavioral and developmental health issues, triaging medical concerns, and following up on chronic health issues such as asthma or eczema. COVID has been a financial catastrophe for pediatric practices, especially in Rhode Island where many practices were struggling even prior to the pandemic. Telemedicine payment parity partially buffers our ongoing increased expenses and lost revenue secondary to COVID.

**Telehealth delivery anywhere.** Our families are juggling work from home, distance learning, isolating, quarantining, and/or caring for their loved ones. They are relieved to have the option of meeting their health provider from the safety and comfort of their homes. Some of our families have very limited transportation and have been grateful for easier access to their provider. Telehealth also reduces the burden on our families who have a family member who is at higher risk for severe outcomes or complications if they were to contract COVID, such as our children with special needs or for moms who are expecting. These higher risk populations often require

more exposure to healthcare settings, so any services that can be provided virtually helps decrease their risk. As an added benefit, the view into home life provides us with valuable information on social determinants of health for our patients. It is also helpful for clinicians to have the option of delivering care from our homes, especially after hours. In doing so, we are able to optimize social distancing and triage care within the medical home while limiting traffic in our office, decreasing the risk of spread of COVID among our patients and our staff. We are better able to conserve PPE, optimize our workflow given our new cleaning protocols, and have been able to coordinate COVID testing through our respiratory clinic, CVS, and National Guard sites via telehealth.

***Multiple modalities of telehealth.*** The world was unprepared for COVID. The meteoric rise in telehealth has outpaced the technological resources that our families have and also the telehealth platforms themselves. Many of our patients, especially the ones who live in rural areas, do not have good internet connections, wireless service, or appropriate devices. The HIPAA-compliant telehealth platforms can be glitchy, losing audio or video, and we have had to convert to audio-only visits frequently. Or, the parent or patient is unable to figure out how to unmute themselves, unblock their webcam, or get a strong enough connection to support the data required for an audio-visual visit. Certainly, we hope these technological disparities and resources will continue to improve, but in the meantime, coverage for audio-only and audio-visual visits is necessary.

***Waiving cost sharing.*** Many of our families are dealing with massive financial losses as unemployment skyrockets. For example, we have had many families inform us that they would not be able to afford behavioral health care given the frequency of visits required for behavioral therapy if not for the waiving of their cost share during this pandemic. Some parents have told us that once the cost share waiver ends, they will be unable to continue their child's behavioral health services due to the additional financial burden. As the economic impact of the pandemic stretches on, we are very worried that our patient families will not reach out to us or their specialists in a timely manner due to concerns about the cost of medical care. Early intervention for many diseases, whether mental or physical, is critical for good outcomes.

While the speed of scientific discovery regarding SARS-COV2 is unprecedented, a safe and effective vaccine will take at least a year for research, development, and administration. Even when such a vaccine is available, it does not guarantee herd immunity or eradication of COVID. The telemedicine policies set up by the pandemic's Executive Orders need to be extended, at the very least, by a year. This public health emergency requires that we, as a society, implement safety nets such as these telehealth policies to help us provide the best care for our patients within their medical home as safely as possible.

Telehealth services provide one crucial way that we can provide timely and medically necessary care while protecting our patients, families, and office. With deep gratitude, we thank you for your leadership and all the work that has been done thus far to maintain access to care, coverage, and payment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sincerely,

*Cindy Klipfel, MD*

*Pogacar, MD*

*Karen Maule, MD*

*Clare McMillan, MD*

Cindy Klipfel, MD, FAAP

Karen Maule, MD, FAAP

Clare McMillan, MD, FAAP

Peter Pogacar, MD, FAAP